

Testimony in Support of Changing the Kindergarten Entrance Date from December 2 to September 1

By Assemblywoman Sharon Runner (36th Assembly District)

I am in strong support of the California Performance Review's recommendation to change the kindergarten entrance date from December 2 to September 1, thus ensuring kids are five years old before entering kindergarten. In fact, I have introduced legislation to achieve that end.

One of my favorite things to do in my district is visit a kindergarten class, and read to the kids, and talk to the teachers about their experience. Almost without exception these teachers tell me that today's increasingly academic kindergarten is not suited for four year-olds who are more interested in running and jumping than sitting in a desk and staying on task.

And the evidence is not purely anecdotal. Numerous research studies show that four-year-olds have not yet developed the fine motor skills necessary to master the academic kindergarten curriculum. They are more likely to be held back, more likely to be thought to have learning disabilities, and more likely to have behavioral problems. In fact, some studies have shown that as many as 64% of kindergartners who are held back start at age four. These children are often defeated in their efforts, not because they lack intelligence, but because they lack the developmental readiness for kindergarten.

In addition to improving the developmental readiness, academic success and self-esteem of our children, this proposal simultaneously allows the state to realize significant cost-savings during our unprecedented budget crisis. Because the cutoff date is moved forward, 2005-2006 kindergarten enrollment will be reduced by 25%. The non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office has estimated that this will result in a \$690 million annual saving for 13 years, as these kindergartners move through the education system.

I realize the concerns regarding the effect of this date change on the "displaced" kindergartners. That is why, in the legislation I introduced, part of the savings was redirected to create new slots for preschool programs that help at-risk children displaced by the date change. And that's just the beginning. As the state's fiscal situation improves, we have the opportunity to use even more of the savings for preschool programs. Far from disadvantaging the young, this proposal can uniquely generate new educational opportunities for our state's most needy children.

I also know that some would prefer to see this debate put off until some form of universal preschool is established in California. However, this is simply not fiscally feasible right now. Some estimates have put the cost of such an endeavor in the billions.

While universal preschool may be something that could be deliberated in the future, it makes more sense to focus on the reality that putting children into classrooms when they aren't developmentally matured is inherently detrimental to their educational well-being.